Reaching the inner ear of the EC

How scientists lobby for their interests at the European Commission

In 1999, one US university alone spent US\$ 760 000 on lobbying politicians for funding to improve its science facilities. Boston University was criticised when it contracted a professional lobbying agency, Cassidy & Associates, to do the 'dirty' work. And that is how it would be considered in the medieval world of European science politics. Welcome to the arcane, unintuitive and dimly lit labyrinth of the European Commission (EC). While some wander the narrow passageways with no more than a tallow torch to light their way, eventually joining the dusty skeletons, others seem to be friends with its keepers, and know the passwords to the secret rooms.

Many scientists lament their lack of influence in the EC, and spend years knocking on closed doors; others have rapid success. Two factors appear to play a critical role: how big you are, and who your friends are. Size is important; a scientific organisation that represents a large number of members is more attractive to the EC than an individual voice. But to be effective it must speak with a single voice. Furthermore, basic researchers must become immersed in the economic and social implications of their research, and, most importantly, follow the tracks laid out by the EC. This is one side to the Commission. The other is a culture shrouded in mystery, and completely impenetrable to all but the initiated; a world that works on long established, trusted contacts, and a code of respect and honour. It has even been likened to the honour-bound way of the Samurai.

But let us start with size. Where academic organisations have fallen far behind in the race to the EC's ears, relative newcomers, such as industry platforms and umbrella organisations, have overtaken them. Prominent among these are the Animal Cell Technology Industrial Platform (ACTIP) and the European Federation for Pharmaceutical Sciences (EUFEPS). As Hans van den Berg from Akzo Nobel, and Chairman of ACTIP, explained, two channels work particularly well in influencing the policy makers. One is including EC representatives in

plenary meetings, at which they are invited to present a status update on the Framework Programme (FP). This provides an opportunity to 'feed people with our opinions', as van den Berg put it. The

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other is writing letters and position papers, which is very effective provided one knows one's correspondent personally and maintains a dialogue with meetings, visits to Brussels, position papers and a continuous information flow in bite-sized chunks. The support of the European Parliament (EP) can also help, because its members are open to receive information on certain topics. However, these contacts in the EP must be cultured, and as van den Berg noted, this is not a professional lobbying approach as seen in Washington. Nevertheless, ACTIP has provided important input to the EC on the drafting of FPs 4 and 5, and has written several position papers in the run-up to FP 6, emphasising the importance of basic research.

It is no accident that industry platforms are listened to by the EC. They span the twilight zone that no one really understands—but takes for granted—between a spark of genius in a scientist's mind, and a development of socio-economic importance. EUFEPS recently hit the jackpot with its position paper 'New Safe Medicines Faster', published and submit-

ted to the EC in August 1999. Its title is mirrored almost word for word in the draft of FP 6, which reads 'Research will focus on rapid development of safer more effective drugs'. As Ole Bjerrum, Vice Presi-

dent of EUFEPS, and Research Counsellor at Novo Nordisk, Denmark, pointed out, 'We wanted to collect bottom-up information that could be useful in the drafting of the 6th Framework Programme'. But what the EUFEPS experience really shows is that if scientists want to sell their advice to the EC directly, they will have to use the right words, and according to Bjerrum, give something in return, i.e. 'part of their working capacity; their brain'.

Those who have had success have clearly promoted the 'right' topic, caught

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the right person at the right time, and were too big to be ignored. Contrast the success of EUFEPS with a smaller academic player such as the European Plant Science Organisation (EPSO), which has found it harder to find fertile ground for its suggestions. Having co-organised three

Stakeholder and expert advice meetings

- Stem cells: therapies for the future?, 18–19 December 2001, Brussels—organised by the HLG
- Life sciences and biotechnology: a strategic vision, 27–28 September 2001, Brussels (the first inter-commissionary stakeholder meeting)—organised by the seven EC Commissioners
- Patenting of genetic information, 5 July 2001, Brussels (expert advice, invitation only)—organised by the HLG
- Genetics and the future of Europe, 7–8 November 2000, Brussels—organised by the HLG

Life Sciences High Level Group of Philippe Busquin

Sir Tom Blundell, University of Cambridge, UK
Prof. Patrick Cunningham, Trinity College, Ireland
Prof. Axel Kahn, Institut Cochin de Génétique Moléculaire, France
Prof. Leonardo Santi, Centro di Biotecnologie Avanzate, Italy
Prof. Hans Wigzell, Karolinska Institute, Sweden
Prof. Rolf Zinkernagel, University of Zürich, Switzerland
Prof. Derek Burke, Cambridge, UK
Prof. Victor de Lorenzo, Centro Nacional de Biotecnología, Spain
Prof. Anne McLaren, Wellcome CRC Institute, UK
Prof. Marc Van Montagu, Ghent University, Belgium
Prof. Ernst Ludwig Winnacker, Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Germany

EC-sponsored meetings in France in 2000 and 2001, EPSO failed to see a single reference to plant sciences in the most recent draft of FP 6—despite its inclusion in previous drafts. This seemingly glaring omission—accompanied by the omission of animal and microbial genomics—was likely due to political unwillingness by the EC to support research on GMOs during public health scares. EPSO followed the FP 6 proposal with a response sent to the EC, EP and Council of Ministers, and plant genomics has duly been raised as an amendment. Comprehensiveness pays dividends.

The European Life Sciences Forum (ELSF) offers a platform to all life scientists to advise the EC in a united fashion. Its manager, Luc van Dyck, however, is sceptical about the EC's desire to include more open-ended academic research in FP 6. Quoting from the FP 6 proposal in *Research priorities under Fundamental knowledge and basic tools for functional genomics*, which reads 'Research will focus on developing high-throughput tools...' he remarked, 'I don't see how they can build networks of excellence around these themes'. Van Dyck recognises the merits of the EC: 'they are taking the right line in infrastructures, targeting major diseases and making opportunities for mobility', he said. However, if he has one message it is that scientists must stop expecting the EC to fund long-term basic research: 'there should be an independent research agency in the EC, because it's obviously not the goal of the EC to fund basic research', he asserted. Indeed, in Title II of the Maastricht Treaty it is clear that the major aim of the EC is to improve competitiveness and employment. From this, it follows that basic researchers would do better to concentrate on their national research councils, and try to dissuade them from taking a lead from the EC in funding distribution.

The elliptical orbit of the EC has taken its science policy from one end of the spectrum to the other; having concentrated on basic research up until FP 4, it then started a relentless assault on technologies, hence the emphasis on application-driven research in FPs 4 and 5. The path of the EC does not appear to be converging with planet basic research in FP 6, but we will have to wait for the final version—conjunc-

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tions with politics and public pressure will influence its horoscope in the meantime.

The political tool of influence presently offered by the EC is the 'stakeholder meeting'. The first of the stakeholder meetings, 'Genetics and the future of Europe', took place in November 2000 in Brussels (Moore and Breithaupt, *EMBO reports*, 2000). It was planned by some of the most respected names in molecular biology,

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the Life Sciences High Level Group (HLG) of Commissioner Philippe Busquin. Prompted by the growing public resistance to biotechnology, Busquin assembled the HLG specifically to improve the way in which the EC interacts with its stakeholders.

The EC is quite open about the brief of the HLG. As Kurt Vandenberghe, a Member of the Cabinet of Philippe Busquin, put it, 'The high level group was formed because Mr Busquin thought there was

too little attention from scientists to dialogue with the public; it is not a scientific committee'. Its mandate was to advise him on emerging topics and how scientists should communicate with the public. However, he continued, 'What they tell the commissioner will trickle down in the FP and influence policy'. The EC under Busquin should certainly be credited with initiatives to involve consumers in the scientific debate. 'The Commissioner engages a lot in dialogue; he is personally very committed to talking with stakeholders', noted Vandenberghe. The stakeholder meetings do, indeed, offer scientists the opportunity to communicate the importance of their often esoteric research to the public that ultimately funds it, and that is no small accomplishment.

However, to its members it is clear that the HLG is not a means for influencing scientific policy. One of these, all of whom were appointed by invitation, is Victor de Lorenzo, from the Centro Nacional de Biotecnología in Madrid. He discovered the extent of his influence with a paper he submitted to Busquin and his staff, emphasising the importance of microbial genetics, among many other suggestions to improve FP 6. The initial response was one of great enthusiasm: 'very timely and interesting document...we'll keep these suggestions in mind', according to de Lorenzo, who concluded 'nothing has happened since that I am aware of'. He is baffled by a decision-making process that is quite impenetrable to scientists. Hence one would be naïve to think that the HLG had been asked for input to FP 6; it was not. In fact, according to Derek Burke from Cambridge, another member,

it had no influence on policy at all.

On the other hand, Burke noted that the group had had moderate success in changing the traditional style of EC meetings. These hitherto consisted of many people talking, and little time for discussion. Finally a paper would be produced, which rather reflected the prepared talks than the views of the stakeholders. But Burke is doubtful of the efficacy of a group that has only convened in its entirety once in five meetings; Busquin chose 'very busy

people who are often *too* busy to come', he reflected. He senses from the diminishing scope for free discussion that control is slowly seeping back to Brussels.

Moreover, policy advice will, in future, be solicited from the European Research Advisory Board (EURAB), inaugurated this October. Its 45 members, half from indus-

try, and only three from the life sciences, will advise the EC on horizontal policy issues such as career structures, mobility and the evaluation of projects—but not

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Prof. Gerry Byrne	University College Dublin	Ireland
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	University of Oslo, Institute of Marine Research (Bergen)	Norway
Dr Arne Wittlöv	AB Volvo	Sweden

science. For that the EC prefers contributions from European agencies and organisations, and the bigger the better. A central umbrella organisation, such as the ELSF, 'would make our life easier' according to

Mingling with politicians does not inspire admiration among fellow scientists

Vandenberghe, who added that 'anything that contributes to more European coherence we welcome and encourage'.

The EC may, indeed, listen to large umbrella organisations representing applied research, but the brutal truth is that basic researchers must mingle with politicians, not shelter under an umbrella. And mingling with politicians does not inspire admiration among fellow scientists.

Just as science has to fight for half a column in the news, so it will have to fight in the political ring

tists. So discovered Gottfried Schatz on leaving his research institute at the Biozentrum at the University of Basel, to take up office as President of the Swiss Science and Technology Council. 'A

colleague remarked "Jeff, you have become a politician" as if I had developed cancer', he reflected, adding 'this is shocking and sad'. Schatz is chipping away at the political monolith by understanding the intricacies of the political connections and contacts both nationally and in the EC. But he takes the daring view that politicians who fight for science should be recognised by scientists. When the American Society of Cell Biology awards prizes for science, it always gives medals to congressmen and politicians for their services to science. In Europe, scientists take it for granted that politicians should support science. But just as science has to fight for half a column in the news, so it will have to fight in the political ring.

Up to the end of the 19th Century, science, business, commerce and trade were

need scientists'. Turning back the clock to Lavoisier's time is a little utopian—if we dispense with the guillotine—so how can scientists be re-established in politics? According to de Lorenzo, there is but one solution: 'we have no choice but to organise a professional lobby'. To engage with politics, the academic side of science must change. Schatz is working on a three-pronged attack on Swiss science funding: reforming the creaky academic system, opening dialogue with

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the public and finally pushing for more investment in research. Politics, according to Schatz, is all about emotions, and this may be hard for scientists to come to terms with: 'Scientific logic works in the forebrain; political logic works in the limbic system—the primitive drives', he joked. And politics, not science, is the way to the inner ear of the EC.

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